Rabbi defends Yeakel Israel stance

I am deeply disturbed by attacks on Lynn Yeakel based on her alleged refusal to repudiate anti-Israel statements made by one of her seven pastors and by certain individuals at forums on the Middle East held at the Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church over two years ago. Ms. Yeakel has written: "I categorically reject all positions, language or views which are anti-Israel or anti-Semitic." Her position paper strongly supports continued aid to Israel, rejects military aid to Arab nations that refuse to recognize Israel's right to exist and also rejects linkage of loan guarantees to Israel's settlement policy. Her beliefs clearly contradict the views stated by some in her church and she has made her position known to her church leadership and membership.

I am particularly concerned because of my involvement in a year-long dialogue between nine members of the Bryn Mawr church and nine members of Beth David. This dialogue grew out of a meeting I was invited to attend sponsored by the church's Peace Task Force. My experience in that dialogue, as well as the cooperation of members of our two communities in their work for the homeless, have convinced me how utterly unfair it is to demonize the Bryn Mawr church and to brand it (with its 3,600 adults) as anti-Semitic.

The Session of the church has unanimously stated that the church has no official policy regarding the Israel-Palestinian conflict and encourages its members to "grapple with complex and baffling issues" and act according to their conscience. I do recognize that there has been an anti-Israel bias among some elements in the hierarchy of not only the Presbyterian but other liberal Protestant denominations.

This has been the subject of detailed analysis by both Jewish and Christian specialists in intergroup relations. Particularly since 1967, some national church bodies have often viewed the Palestinians as completely innocent victims and have branded the Israelis as virtually the sole cause of today's conflict in the Middle East.

I discovered through the dialogue led by Rev. Stephen Michie and myself that among the Presbyterians (who were a representative group from their Peace Task Force) there was a unanimous commitment to Israel's right to permanent and secure existence.

The most significant difference that emerged was what Israel required for its security. On this crucial issue there were differences both among the Presbyterians and among the Jews. *Some* of the Presbyterians were convinced that the Palestinians (including the PLO) are totally committed to peace and to respecting Israel's secure existence; all that is needed is for Israel to pull back to the 1949 borders. Jewish participants (myself included) forcefully pointed out the historic and current reasons for Israel's legitimate concerns; for example, any pull-back without enforceable security guarantees could lead to domination of the West Bank and Gaza by extremists dedicated to Israel's destruction.

I am totally convinced that Lynn Yeakel does understand Israel's security needs and does strongly support Israel's right to maintain that security. To demand that Ms. Yeakel denounce her church is an affront to the principle of diversity that is the policy of the church as affirmed by its Session. I have experienced that diversity through my contact with a number of its clergy and members. I refuse to stereotype or smear with a broad brush as has been done by well-intentioned zealots in the Jewish community.

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